

EXPLORING TEACHERS' ROLES AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

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Abstract: Malaysia is one of the countries that provides education to all children including special needs children. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are categorized under children with special needs because they are lacking in socializing, language and communication skills, and also involving both behavioural and cognitive problems. This study focuses on the roles of teachers and their challenges in helping autistic children to develop their language and communication skills. It is a qualitative study that uses purposive sampling method and applies semi-structured interview to collect data from six teachers who have had experiences in dealing with autistic children. Findings of this study discusses the roles of teachers such as cooperating with parents, children and other teachers; conducting observation and assessment; and managing children's behavioural, cognitive and environmental problems. Based on the findings and discussions, it was shown that teachers who worked with ASD children possessed double crucial roles and challenges in order to support these children in their language and communication development.

Keywords: *Autism; Communication; Language Development; Special Needs Children; Teachers' Role.*

INTRODUCTION

Currently, most children with special needs have started to get involved in educational settings around the world. Their participation in educational setting is based on the slogan of 'Education for All' by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2001). In line with this, Malaysia's Ministry of Education has provided special education for these children (Education Act 1996, 2010), and simultaneously teachers' roles in providing and supporting them have become more prominent in making sure that they are able to live independently in future.

In Malaysia, the government has provided a special place called 'Permata Kurnia' as the learning institution for children with autism. There are also some autism centres that have been developed by non-government agencies. One of them is known as the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM), which was developed in to assess and provide diagnosis services to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such as an Early Intervention Program, Transition Program, Mainstreaming Program, Pre-Vocational Program, Vocational Program, Residential Program Assessment and diagnosis and Therapy Programme (The National Autism Society of Malaysia, 2018).

The term "Autism" originally derived from a Greek word. "Autos" means "self" that reflects a person with social impairment in life (Zaky, 2017). Autism or scientifically known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is closely related to the developmental disorder due to deficit

in terms of communication, social and cognitive processing (Randi, Newman & Grigorenko, 2010; Omar, Hussin & Siraj, 2013). ASD is a complex disorder involving abnormal development of the neurological system and is suffered throughout the individual's lifetime (Razali *et al.*, 2013). Smith *et al.* (2014) stated that ASDs are pervasive development disorders that primarily affect social interactions, language and behaviours of an individual with Autism. PERMATA Division (2017) defines Autism as a neurological disorder which negatively impacts a child's social interaction skills and imaginations. This means that a child with autism may have speech impairment, problems interacting with others and limited play skills and interests.

Autism children experience different developments compared to other children. They face a lot of problem in their daily lives since they are unable to express their feelings and needs through verbal communication. It may be difficult for teachers to teach them, especially when they are lacking in both language and communication since they are important for social interaction and maintain relationships with others (Neaum, 2012). Moreover, language and communication development is one of the six strands that are highlighted in the National Standard Preschool Curriculum to support the holistic development of children (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016). It can be defined as the skills that include the ability to understand others and express oneself using words, gestures or facial expressions (Gardner-Neblett & Gallagher, 2013). According to the Ministry of Health of Manatu Hauora (2017), people with ASD normally communicate through body language or facial expression. Therefore, teachers must have these skills in order to deliver the content during the teaching and learning process so that the ASD children are able to understand and apply the content learned.

Rationale of the Research

The research on exploring teachers' roles and challenges in developing language and communication for ASD children would be beneficial in gaining a full understanding of teachers' roles in supporting ASD children. By focusing on the importance of developing language and communication for ASD children, the researcher is able to get a clear picture of how responsible teachers support the ASD children in Malaysia. It is important so that these children are able to express their feelings and help others understand them. At the same time, it also helps them to become independent.

Previously, there were many studies related to autistic children conducted in Malaysia (Min & Wah, 2011; Omar, Hussin & Siraj, 2013; Razali *et al.*, 2013; Azahari *et al.*, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2015; Nair, 2015; Yeo & Teng, 2015; Zuki & Rahman, 2016; Low, Lee & Ahmad, 2017; Roslan *et al.*, 2017). However, only some of them focused on supporting language and communication for ASD children (Min & Wah, 2011; Azahari *et al.*, 2015; Nair, 2015). Therefore, the aims of the current study are to explore the roles of preschool teachers and identify their challenges in developing language and communication among ASD children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview about SEN in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the rights of education for children with special needs have been stated under the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. The special need education is managed by the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Women, Family and Community; and Ministry of Education. Malaysia's Ministry of Education (2013) provides three types of special needs programs; the Special Education Schools, Special Education Integration Programs, and the Inclusive Education Program. Furthermore, ASD children are classified under the special needs children as stated by the Ministry of Education. A special education program offered by the government for ASD children is known as the PERMATA Kurnia, which was developed by PERMATA Malaysia.

Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defined ASD children as individuals who are experiencing deficits in social emotional, non-verbal communication, and in developing, maintaining and understanding relationship (Joseph, Soorya & Thurm, 2015, p.4). According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (2017), ASD occurred since childhood and affected child's ability in social, communication, language and having lack of interests in daily activities. The National Autism Society of Malaysia (2018, p.1) viewed autism as 'a complex developmental disability that typically appeared during the first three years of life due to a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain' and it mostly occurred in boys. Statistic on the number of children born with autism is estimated in one in every 600 births in Malaysia (NASOM, 2018). Children with ASD easily get depressed, feeling anxious and also easily experience attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (World Health Organization, 2017).

Language and communication development for Autism Spectrum Disorder

Deficits in language development have been widely studied, as they are often considered as a defining characteristic of autism. Extant evidence has identified three common deficits in the language development of children with ASD: early language delays (Weismer, Lord & Esler, 2010), atypical language production (Roberts-Holmes, 2014), and discourse difficulties (McCann *et al.*, 2007). More specifically, while typically-developing children usually generate their first word at the age of 8-14 months, children with ASD generally do not produce their first word until around 38 months. In addition, delays in both receptive and expressive languages have been identified, with receptive language found to be the most severely impacted (Weismer, Lord & Esler, 2010).

It is very important to understand the basic concepts of language and communication development. Owen (2013) defined language as a social shared code system used for communication. There are two dimensions of language for communication, namely the receptive language and expressive language (Tager-Flusberg *et al.*, 2007). Tager-Flusberg *et al.* (2007) explained that the first sign of the receptive language happened between six to twelve months old, whereby the child starts to respond to simple instructions such as 'come', or 'sit down' or 'no' and 'stop'. Later, they started to imitate the words used by adults around them to ask for help and attention, which was known as the expressive language. Communication includes speech, language, body gesture, sign language and the use of written and graphic codes (Owen, 2013). Furthermore, communication was also classified as intentional and non-intentional communication (Tomasello, 2008). Tomasello (2008) stated that the non-intentional communication began from birth when a child cried, to convey his needs. However, it only emerged when a child has attained intentionally.

Role of teachers in developing language and communication for ASD children

Teachers are one of the most significant individuals in children's educational context. With a growing number of young children (from birth to age 8) with disabilities attending early childhood educational setting, the role of early childhood teachers in implementing inclusive education has become increasingly important (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). There are many roles which should be taken by teachers, especially those who are teaching children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The most important aspect in preparing the best practice for autistic children is the teachers' needs to understand them very well (Jones *et al.*, 2009; Parsons *et al.* 2011; Lindsay *et al.*, 2013). According to the PERMATA Division (2018), some of the teachers' roles are to make observation and assessment on the children's ability; prepare teaching plan with their objectives; make collaboration with parents especially on the teaching plan; manage the classroom and children's behaviour as well. However, the number of research from previous studies that investigate the teacher's role in working with autistic children in Malaysia is very limited.

Previous studies found that the cooperation between teachers, parents and children become the most important role for teachers in teaching children with special needs (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009; Devecchi *et al.*, 2012). The cooperation between teachers and parents could lead to children's success because it allowed teachers to have a better understanding of the children and their specific needs (Lindsay *et al.*, 2014). The most common methods used in communication among teachers and parents are phone calls, meetings with parents and informal moments at school (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, having cooperation with the children is also very crucial to make sure that they achieve the learning objectives. Finch, Watson and MacGregor (2013) found that communication is one of the teaching strategies to support children with ASD. In addition, Takala, Pirttimaa and Törmänen (2009) emphasised on the cooperative teaching between teachers in which some teachers thought that spending time with the whole class help them to become better acquainted with their students. It was also noted that two teachers can do more than one thing in a class, and thus more pupils would receive support. In addition, the lessons are also better designed when two teachers are involved. Therefore, collaboration with other teachers will help in elevating teacher's experiences as well (Finch, Watson & MacGregor, 2013).

In enhancing children for learning, teachers need to do observation and assessment to see the progress of the children in terms of learning (Devecchi *et al.*, 2012; Rovira, 2014; Koh, 2017). Observation and assessment are methods in monitoring children's progresses in schools. They can be done by questioning the children during the lesson, class work, homework and tests in order to make sure that the objective of learning is achieved (Katsafanas, 2006). In Norway, teacher used rating scales as the method of measuring children's progress. Chong (2010), emphasised that the rating scale is the best method to measure the changes of children's behaviour, attention span, skills and many more. However, teachers in France were used to practice continuous assessment that was based on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). IEP is the process of assessing the children on their 'cognitive ability, communication skills, operational capacity, emotional, interpersonal, sensory function, health status, ability of daily life, language skills, mathematics and other academic ability' (Chong, 2010, pg.89).

In addition, managing children's behaviour and emotional needs in school context required the involvement of teachers in order to make sure that their learning processes run smoothly (Devecchi *et al.*, 2012; Roslan *et al.*, 2017). A study conducted by Roslan *et al.* (2017) found four different themes in children's behaviour, namely physical, intellectual, social and emotional. Cavanaugh (2012) stated that teachers need to be trained, aware and supported in order to meet the need of children. This is very important for teachers to promote and maintain the positive behaviour of children so that the objective of learning can be achieved. In addition, teachers need to prevent children from aggressive behaviours by providing them with a fidget toy to help them focus, assisting them to calm themselves; changing the learning environment by sending them to other classrooms and give them some space (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013).

Challenges that the teachers faced

Working with autistic children is one of the challenging experiences that teachers might face. The challenges are not parallel to teachers who work with normal children. In Malaysia, there were a number of studies that investigated on the challenges of teachers in supporting special needs children in learning (Razali *et al.*, 2013; Nair, 2015; Hussin & Hamdan, 2016; Nasir & Efendi, 2016; Roslan *et al.*, 2017).

Student's behavioural problem becomes one of the challenges faced by teachers who work with children with autism (Nair, 2015; Roslan *et al.*, 2017). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) commonly have problem in communicating with others as if they are in their own world (Nair, 2015). Furthermore, Nair (2015) found that the behaviour of ASD children brought the biggest challenge to teachers instead of their academic performance in class. Furthermore, Roslan *et al.* (2017) categorised children's challenged behaviours into four categories namely physical behaviour such as repetitive behaviour and commit self-injury; intellectual behaviour such as passive learner; social behaviour such as refused to communicate and poor social skills; and emotional behaviour such as mood swing, depressed and tantrum.

Students' cognitive problem is the second challenged faced by the teacher in supporting language and communication towards children with autism (Nair, 2015; Zuki & Rahman, 2016; Roslan *et al.*, 2017). According to the previous study, Yeo and Teng (2015) found that cognitive area becomes the highest area that affects ASD children compared to behavioural and affective. Nair (2015) stated that children with ASD faced problem in cognitive abilities because they experienced delays in verbal and written language. Zuki and Rahman (2016) described ASD children to have short-term focus in class and in any other activities. Thus, teachers need to prepare different styles of learning for children to make sure they understand the lesson. In a different study, Roslan *et al.* (2017) revealed that some ASD children were able to complete in-class activities and have good reading skills as well. This can be concluded that every ASD child is unique and they experience different levels of cognitive ability in life.

Environmental issue is also important in enhancing children's learning. It could also be one of the challenges for teachers. Teachers' attitude in classroom, knowledge and skills in teaching, and readiness in accepting them in their classrooms could affect the learning environment and activities (Razali *et al.*, 2013). In addition, in other study, Nasir and Efendi (2016) stated that the facilities, readiness, resources, and appropriate teaching materials were the factors that would affect the learning environment of the children. Furthermore, school administrations and parents also become one of the important aspects that affect the environment of children's learning (Hussin & Hamdan, 2016). According to Finch, Watson and MacGregor (2013), positive environment is one of the teaching strategies that teachers need to practice such as by avoiding overstimulation, comfortable environment, offering praises and suitable schedules.

Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory was introduced by a Russian psychologist named Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). It focused on the development of mental functions through social interactions with peers and adults. The mental functions of children involve lower mental functions and higher mental functions that included language ability, problem solving and other skills (Doolittle, 1995). Wang, Bruce and Hughes (2011) explained that the theory is about how individual's interactions related to the cognitive development of human being either between people, objects and events.

In learning, sociocultural theory involves with the process of scaffolding and the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more knowledgeable others' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Scaffolding's technique is applied when children need help and support from others such as expert peers and adults in order to complete an activity and achieve the goal (Turuk, 2008; Berk, 2013). Hence, in order to develop the language and communication among ASD children, teachers must include scaffolding because their cognitive process were not fully developed. Teachers who apply the concept of scaffolding in supporting language to ASD children can help in providing clear direction, increasing the children's attention span and managing their behaviour.

Theory of Mind

This theory have been widely applied to explain about the cognitive deficit of children with Autism. According to Tager-Flusberg (2007), the theory of mind focused on deficits reasoning of the mental state. Colle, Baron-Cohen and Hill (2007) explained that the theory of mind is referred as the ability to know the feelings, thoughts and beliefs of a person which does not match the reality. Children with autism experienced great difficulties in assuming other people's feelings, thoughts and belief which is similar to the concept of mind blindness. Therefore, it leads to some behaviours such as fear, lack of communication, lack of empathy, and no interaction or socialization due to the lack of ability to understand other people. Hence, most

studies related to the theory of mind found that ASD children show deficits in the theory of mind (Kimhi, 2014).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study uses qualitative research method as the research methodology. It focuses on understanding people's feelings and how they experience the world around them (Merriam, 2009). This method is also described as a method of discovery of the subject holistically which requires detailed explanation rather than simple description (Williams, 2007). Researchers who applies the qualitative research method would normally assume that social reality exists independently and their knowledge is very personal and subjective (Long, 2014). Therefore, by using the qualitative research method, the researcher is able to have interactions with teachers who have experiences in teaching Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children, understand their feelings and challenges faced in supporting the children's development in terms for language and communication.

Research Design

Phenomenological research is about the study on the experiences of a person (Creswell, 2007). Maruna and Bultler (2005) explained the phenomenology research for social sciences is related to the detailed description of consciousness together with the inner experiences from an individual's perspective. Schram (2003) as cited in Merriam (2009) determined that the phenomenologists were only interested to study and discover about the everyday life and social action of a person in his/her daily life. Therefore, the researcher has to stand in other person's shoes when doing the research in order to deeply understand about the individual's experiences. In this research, the researcher used the phenomenological research design to explore and discover the role of teacher and challenges in developing language and communication among Autism Spectrum Disorder's children in early year's perspectives.

Moreover, according to Mukherji and Albon (2010), methodology of a research is influenced by the research paradigm that is chosen by the researcher. In this research, the researcher chose interpretivism approach as the research paradigm which differs from the method of positivism approach. Matthews and Ross (2010) explained interpretivism approach as a process of interpreting and understanding of social phenomena about people subjectively in order to achieve the objective of a research. Therefore, the researcher focuses on the subjective matter when collecting the data rather than numerical data. By using interpretivism approach, the focus was more on the concrete and specific ideas rather than in general perspectives (Carson *et al.*, 2001). The researcher interviewed six teachers and collected different concrete and specific ideas about their personal views and perspectives on their roles and challenges in developing language and communication for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Every teacher provided different views according to their life experiences in working with the Autistic children.

Data Collection Method

Sampling is a method used by the researcher to study the representative sample that is chosen for the research. Non-probability sampling is one of the sampling methods used for qualitative study. Alvi (2016) stated that the non-probability sampling or non-random sampling only involved small sample for the researcher to focus on. Therefore, the researcher used non-probability sampling for the current research. Furthermore, the research only focused on small sample, which consisted of six teachers from the nearby pre-school and Autism Centre.

Purposive sampling is a sampling technique used in qualitative research. The sampling technique is also known as non-probability sampling involved with the method of selecting for the certain units or cases for study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Researcher needs to find samples among a specific population and it can be difficult to reach the sample (Neuman, 2014).

According to Teddlie and Yu (2007), the sample for the purposive sampling is typically small, which need to have less than 30 samples. In this research, there were six respondents who have been chosen among big number of teachers who teach the Autism Spectrum Disorders' children. The researcher had gathered the information based on the research questions developed earlier through the interview process to deeply identify and explore the role of teachers and challenges faced when developing language and communication for the children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

An inform consent form was given to all participants so that they understood the purpose of the research, their rights and importance of their involvement in this research, data collection method that the researcher intended to use, and the confidentiality of their personal information. There were six teachers who participated in this research. All of them have experiences working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders at kindergarten and Autism's centre (NASOM). Before the interview began, the researcher explained further on the information provided in the inform consent form and allowed the participant to read it on their own. In addition to that, the researcher also informed the participants that the interview process was going to be recorded and conducted for about 30 to 60 minutes. The researcher used the word 'anonymous' instead of their actual names in order to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

Interview is the most common method as data collection method for a qualitative research. It is useful in collecting detailed descriptions of participants through natural setting (Weiss, 1994 as cited in Alshenqeeti (2014). Therefore, the researcher applied interview as the method in collecting data. Semi-structured interview was used to provide participants with open and closed-ended questions. According to Mukherji and Albon (2010), semi-structured interview was normally used in qualitative research since it provided both open and closed-ended questions. The researcher took about 30 to 60 minutes to interview each participant.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis began from the beginning of the research, which include interviewing, observation, text publishing, reading and rereading the data gained (Liamputtong, 2009). In analysing the large set of qualitative data, thematic analysis was used (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). In this research, data from the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Then, it was transcribed in order to collect information related to the research questions. The data was also critically analysed and divided into different themes. The researcher did the process of thematic analysis coding manually without using any software.

In qualitative research, validity was defined as the tool's processes and data appropriateness while reliability was referred to the exact trustworthiness of the processes and the findings in the research (Leung, 2015). Noble and Smith (2015) introduced some strategies to enhance the credibility of a qualitative research. Validity of a qualitative research referred to the truth value of the findings. In doing this, the researcher had reflected on previous studies. Audio recording for semi-structured interviews also helped in finding truth. The researcher could listen to the recorded audio repeatedly and verify for the corrected data. In terms of reliability or consistency, the researcher clearly described the research process from initial stage until the process of reporting the findings. Thus, throughout the research, the researcher clearly explained the processes involved in order to make sure its validity and reliability has achieved the scientific rigour of the research.

Furthermore, triangulation was a strategy used to strengthen the internal validity of a research (Merriam, 2009). According to Carter *et al.* (2014), strategy to view the validity of a research was through the combination of information from multiple sources. In this research, the researcher applied the most commonly used method in qualitative research; that is the triangulation method, which consisted of interview, note taking, and observation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present research is designed to explore the roles and challenges of teachers in developing language and communication development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). In this research, the researcher focused on six teachers who have had experiences in working with ASD children, either in a kindergarten or an Autism centre that is located in the area of Klang Valley, Malaysia.

This research only focused on the roles and challenges of supporting the ASD children but not on inclusive education. In terms of the teachers' roles in developing language and communication skills among ASD children, the researcher has categorised the findings into several themes, namely cooperating with parents, children and other teachers; conducting observation and assessment, and managing the children's behaviour. Moreover, the themes generated for the challenges faced by teachers are children's behavioural problem, cognitive problem and environmental problem.

The Roles of Teachers in Developing Language and Communication Skills among ASD Children

Cooperating with parents, children and other teachers

From the study, it was found that the key to having cooperation with other parties was communication. Most participants believed that communication was the best method in getting cooperation from parents, children and other teachers. In addition to that, most participants communicated with the ASD children in the same way they communicated with other normal children.

Parents would normally ask the participants if their children showed any positive changes. Participant 1 mentioned that some parents only wanted to see the obvious changes or progress in their children. They ignored the small progressed made by these children. Thus, the participants needed to make sure that parents understood their children's learning processes as well as both language and communication development. Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson (2014) emphasized that having cooperation between both parents and teachers would lead to positive achievement in children. Parents who understood their children's needs would send their kids for interventions and therapies so that their children were able to socialize with their peers.

Moreover, Participant 2 stated that she would normally communicate informally with the children's parents to update them on their children's schedule and ask them about their children's interests and other matters. This finding was supported by Rodrigues, Campos, Chaves and Martins (2015) who claimed that communication strategies among parents and teachers include phone calls, formal and informal meetings in school.

Furthermore, the present study also found that in order to support ASD children's language and communication development, teachers need to consistently communicate with them by using correct sentences and proper languages. Participant 1 mentioned that sometimes she needed to repeat her sentences several times to make sure they understood the message being delivered. It was quite challenging as sometimes these children would repeat the questions asked by teachers instead of answering them, as claimed by Participant 2. According to Participant 5, some ASD children preferred to use sign language and non-verbal communication such as finger pointing, whereas Participant 2 and 4 stated that ASD children who were not able to communicate verbally would use body language and photo cards to communicate with others. This finding is supported by Roslan, Azizan, Othman, Rahim, Ramli, Sulaiman and Zainal (2017) who found that ASD children tend to use non-verbal communications such as facial expressions and body language to address their needs. ASD children were able to relate photo cards with real life and learn better by using them (Azahari, Ahmad, Jamaludi, Hashim & Aziz, 2015).

On the other hand, no matter how difficult or challenging the situation was, all participants continued to communicate with the ASD children in the hope of developing their

language and communication skills. This finding was consistent with Finch, Watson and MacGregor (2013) who mentioned that communication was the best teaching strategy in developing the language and communication for children with ASD. Some participants believed that they should communicate with ASD children the same way they communicate with other normal children. But, the communication process should be based on the child's ability.

In addition to that, teachers also get cooperation and support from other experts such as a speech therapist and an experienced teacher. Participant 1 mentioned that she referred to a speech therapist on ways to assist ASD children to speak better. Participant 3 and 5 stated that they would ask help from other teachers who have more experienced than them. This finding was consistent with Takala, Pirttimaa and Törmänen (2009) who found that cooperation among teachers would help children in developing their skills and confidence levels. Teachers could also support ASD children by modifying the curriculum, creating meaningful task, meeting individual needs and participating in activities (Finch, Watson & MacGregor, 2013).

Conducting observation and assessment

Observing and assessing ASD children was also one of the teachers' roles. By doing so, teachers were able to identify their progress and development in terms of language and communication. Teachers would normally observe and assess these children during the learning processes that took place in daily activities. For instance, Participant 3 assessed these children on what they could and could not do, whereas Participant 4 would assess them according to their levels of capability.

Most participants assessed the ASD children in terms of their behaviours, abilities and interests. According to Katsfanas (2006), observations and assessments could be done by giving the children class work activities, homework and tests. Teachers could also apply the rating scale technique as suggested by Chong (2010). The scale was used to measure children's behavioural changes, attention span, and other aspects of their development. Chong (2010) also believed that the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be used to assess children's communication skills, cognitive abilities and other abilities that they might have. Teachers should play important roles in both observing and assessing ASD children as it would lead them to making positive achievements.

Managing Children's Behaviour

Another role of a teacher was to manage children's behaviours. All participants agreed that they had to manage the children's behavioural problems on a daily basis. For example, Participant 1 mentioned that she would give them a 'time out' for few minutes, before calling the student to explain about what had happened. She believed that the 'time out' strategy worked well. Participant 2 and 3 would make sure that the child with behavioural problems would not get any closer to other children. They would normally take the child to sit with them or at the corner of the classroom and facing the wall. Participant 4 stated that she would let the child to cool down, whereas Participant 6 believed that it was acceptable if the child wanted to be isolated or alone since he would join the class activities once he had felt better. For Participant 5, she suggested not to ignore the child, instead, teachers should gain their interest in participating classroom activities.

All participants suggested different techniques in managing children's behavioural problems since their parents were not there to protect or care for them. Thus, teachers needed to learn to manage their behaviours to help smoothen the learning process (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2012); Roslan et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers should be equipped with the appropriate skills in handling ASD children. They should be aware of the behavioural changes and seek support from other (Cavanaugh, 2012). In other words, teachers should learn to manage children's behavioural problems as their behaviours can be unpredictable and consistently changing depending on their mood and surroundings.

Challenges of the Teachers

The second objective of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by teachers who teach children with ASD. The themes emerged include children's behavioural problems, children's cognitive problems and environmental problems.

Children's Behavioural Problems

All participants agreed that ASD children's behavioural problems such as throwing tantrums, biting or hurting other children, running around in class were some of the challenges that they face on a regular basis. Participant 4 mentioned that these children were physically strong. Participant 3 added that their moods and behaviours frequently changed, whereas Participant 2 and Participant 6 stated that they disturbed other students with aggressive behaviours that include hitting, slapping and biting.

There were four categories of behaviours for ASD children; namely physical behaviour, intellectual behaviour, social behaviour, and emotional behaviour (Roslan et al., 2017). In line with the findings, all participants faced challenges in dealing with behavioural problems, especially both physical and social behavioural problems. Furthermore, Nair (2015) believed that academic performance was not the main problem for ASD children as compared to their behavioural problem. Thus, teachers needed to focus more on ways to manage their behaviours rather than formal learning.

Children's Cognitive Problem

Another challenge that was faced by these participants was related to the cognitive abilities of ASD children. Participant 1 and Participant 4 stated that some of these children do not talk and communicate at all. Participant 3 added that they did not respond when their names are being called out and they avoided having eye contacts. Moreover, Participant 2 mentioned that some of them have difficulties in feeding themselves and going to toilets. They were not toilet trained.

The communication process was the biggest challenge. This finding was consistent with Nair (2015) who mentioned that most ASD children with cognitive problem would have difficulties in both verbal and written language. According to Participant 6, they have a very short attention span, which supported by Zuki and Rahman (2016). Therefore, teachers needed to think creatively on ways to improve the children's communication process and make learning enjoyable so that they were able to be involved in daily communication and learned better.

Environmental Problem

Environment could be a factor that would bring challenges to teachers. It involved individuals who were related to the ASD children such as their parents, other teachers and students. Participant 1 stated that the biggest challenge was to make sure that parents understood what teachers do. Based on her experience, she realized that most parents did not understand how ASD child learned and developed, especially in terms of their language and communication. She also stated that dealing with other teachers could also be challenging as each teacher has their own ways and methods of doing things, including teachings. Hussin and Hamdan (2016) revealed that the school administration and parental involvement affect children's learning environment. Therefore, teachers should be able to manage the parents and other teachers effectively.

In contrast, Participant 6 who taught in a preschool that consisted of both normal and special needs children, mentioned that her biggest challenge was to assist normal children to mix with ASD children. Normal children did not understand why ASD children suddenly became aggressive and started to hit others. In other words, it took time for them to understand and accept the ASD children. She said that it was quite challenging to explain to the normal children the reasons why most ASD children suddenly became aggressive and threw tantrums.

She added that it took about one year for the normal children to understand their ASD classmates.

According to Nasir and Efendi (2016), facilities, readiness, resources and appropriate materials for teaching were the challenges that teachers faced in teaching children with ASD. However, none of the participants regarded providing materials for ASD children as a challenge. This was because the preschool has provided enough materials for them. As mentioned by Participant 2, it was not necessary to use expensive tools in teaching them but teachers should think of other creative ways to teach by using available materials. In addition to that, Participant 2 mentioned that most parents have already provided their children with daily needs and essentials such as foods, toys or puzzles. Thus, teachers only need to think of creative and fun ways in teaching them. This was also related to teachers' abilities in making observations and assessments on the ASD children and preparing lessons according to their interests.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teachers who teach ASD children have to play significant roles and experience great challenges in order to develop the language and communication development of the children compared to teachers who teach normal children. Through the literature review and findings of this research, the roles of teachers include having cooperation with parents, children and other teachers; conducting observation and assessment; and managing the behaviours of children. The challenges faced by the teachers were related to the children's behavioural; cognitive; and environmental problem.

With the aims of the research to explore the roles of teachers and their challenges in developing language and communication among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the researcher has conducted the study by using semi-structured interview with six respondents. All of the respondents were selected from teachers' population whom have had experiences of working with ASD children at preschools and also an Autism centre.

There were some recommendations for future research. First, the area of the study could be broadly expanded to other states in Malaysia. Second, since all of the participants involved in the current study were female participants, more male participants and parents of ASD children could be chosen as samples of research. Third, future researcher could conduct classroom observations as the methods of collecting data besides interview sessions.

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